

Maintained special

Schools Data

39

No. of schools in 2025

Pupils Data

6,310

All pupils

262

No. of pupils under 5

2,071

No. of pupils aged 5 to 10

2,942

No. of pupils aged 11 to 15

1,035

No. of pupils aged 16 and over

45.4%

eFSM (Aged 5-15)

Follow-up Data

No. in FU September 2024

Inspection activity

No. removed 2024-2025

No. of core inspections: **6**

SI: **1**

No. of interim visits: **2**

No. went into FU after core inspection 2024-2025

SI: **1**

Total in FU August 2025

ER: **1** SM: **1** SI: **1**

Summary

In all schools inspected this year, staff had a good understanding of pupils' additional learning needs and created nurturing environments that enabled pupils to thrive. Schools provided broad curricula that included real-life experiences and opportunities for accreditation. Pupil voice was strong, and values-driven leadership was effective. Strategic professional learning and partnerships supported pupils well. However, the quality of teaching varied, and attendance remained too low overall, especially for pupils with social, emotional or mental health needs. Challenges such as resourcing, restrictive learning spaces, staff absence and weak communication systems had a negative impact on provision. Nevertheless, most pupils made strong progress in communication, independence and social skills through targeted intervention and successful transition planning.

Teaching and learning

Schools fostered nurturing relationships with pupils, and ensured that teaching was effective and that environments were engaging. As a result, most pupils made strong progress from their individual starting points in a wide range of skills. Staff had a clear understanding of pupils' additional learning needs and applied a range of strategies to promote communication, independence and engagement. A total communication approach that includes the use of assistive technologies, alongside structured teaching, supported nearly all pupils to access their learning, express themselves, and develop valuable social and life skills.

Where teaching was most effective, it was well-planned, personalised, and relevant to pupils' interests and experiences. Staff provided immediate and supportive feedback, motivating pupils to make sustained progress. However, in a few instances, teaching was too adult directed, insufficiently adapted, or lacked pace, leading to reduced engagement and challenge. In these cases, expectations were unclear, and teaching assistants were not always deployed purposefully to assist pupils.

In most schools, there was a strong focus on developing communication, literacy and numeracy in meaningful, real-life contexts. Pupils developed functional skills through activities such as cooking, shopping, and enterprise. Many engaged successfully in creative, physical and digital learning experiences, and benefited from enrichment opportunities that included music, sport, residential experiences and international visits. In a few schools, support for Welsh first-language learners and clear progression pathways remain limited. At [Ysgol Pen Coch](#), in Flintshire, pupils benefit from effective sensory learning.

Schools' individual curricula were broad, inclusive, and increasingly shaped around individual needs and interests. Planning supported skill progression, with a particular focus on well-being, healthy lifestyles, and preparation for adult life. Relationships and sexuality education (RSE) was delivered at appropriate levels, supporting pupils' understanding of self-care, consent and relationships. Read about how [Ysgol Y Deri](#) in the Vale of Glamorgan provides a strong vocational curriculum.

Most pupils made strong progress and developed the skills and confidence needed to successfully take their next steps in learning or life. Post-16 and vocational learning pathways were increasingly personalised and aspirational, leading to relevant accreditation and successful transitions to the next phase. However, in a minority of schools, there were more limited progression routes, both within their current school and beyond, with restricted access to courses in off-site college provision.

Well-being, care, support and guidance

Across schools, there was a strong culture of care, support and safeguarding that underpinned the well-being and development of pupils. Staff developed warm, trusting relationships with pupils, creating calm, nurturing environments where most pupils felt safe, valued and supported. Schools placed pupils' well-being at the heart of their work, using multi-agency approaches, personalised plans, and therapeutic input to meet the wide-ranging and complex needs of pupils. Staff consistently helped pupils to regulate their emotions and behaviour, develop positive attitudes to learning and engage well in school life.

A wide range of staff and specialist teams provided effective support in areas such as communication, physical development, and behaviour, often making a significant contribution to classroom practice and pupil progress. Safeguarding arrangements were robust and well understood.

Pupil voice was a notable strength, with pupils actively involved in decision-making, leadership roles and the wider life of the school. They influenced curriculum design, contributed to staff appointments and participated in local and national initiatives. Where appropriate, pupils demonstrated their understanding of rights and showed high levels of respect and inclusivity. Opportunities for developing independence and life skills were well embedded, particularly for older pupils, who benefited from relevant accreditation and purposeful transition planning.

Schools maintained strong partnerships with families and external agencies. Effective communication, workshops and outreach programmes enhanced support for both pupils and their families. In many cases, these partnerships led to improved attendance, well-being, and learning outcomes. However, despite positive interventions, attendance remains too low for a few pupils, especially those with social and emotional needs or medical conditions.

Overall, pupils thrived within inclusive, rights-based communities that celebrated their achievements and prepared them well for their next steps. Behaviour was generally well supported through relational and trauma-informed approaches. However, in a few schools, the lack of consistency in these practices, alongside weaknesses in learning environments and target-setting, resulted in uneven support that limited pupils' independence, engagement, and progress. In Ysgol y Gogarth [Conwy], Ysgol Pen Coch [Flintshire], Ysgol Y Deri [Vale of Glamorgan], Greenfield School [Merthyr Tydfil] and Park Lane [Rhondda Cynon Taf] staff build purposeful community-focused education across schools.

Leading and improving

Leadership across maintained special schools was underpinned by strong, inclusive values. Leaders showed a shared commitment to pupil well-being, high expectations, and continuous improvement. Overall, leaders provided calm, strategic guidance through periods of significant challenge, including instances of bereavement, organisational restructuring and rapid school expansion. Leadership was becoming more widely shared across all schools with a growing emphasis on collaborative approaches and shared responsibility. A notable strength was the alignment of professional learning with school priorities. In the most effective settings, this was supported by coaching, peer learning, and international collaboration. These approaches improved staff capacity and provision. Strong partnerships with families and external agencies enhanced support for pupils' holistic development.

Governance was generally improving, with many governing bodies offering effective oversight in

areas such as safeguarding and finance. Where governance was strongest, governors acted as knowledgeable, proactive critical friends who engaged in regular learning walks and strategic challenge. However, in a few schools, governors' limited understanding of teaching and learning reduced their ability to hold leaders to account. Strategic priorities around teaching quality were not always sharply focused due to underdeveloped quality assurance systems. Operational pressures, including high staff absence and limited leadership capacity, hindered consistent teaching and curriculum delivery. While professional learning was widespread, evaluation of its impact remained inconsistent.

Rapid expansion led to overcrowding in many schools, limiting access to therapeutic and curriculum-specific spaces and reducing opportunities for independence and sensory regulation. These environmental constraints affected pupils' well-being and limited curriculum quality. Financial challenges, particularly unsustainable staffing costs and delayed funding for newly placed pupils, presented ongoing risks to long-term planning.

In a few schools, senior leaders are overburdened with operational responsibilities, limiting strategic focus. Role clarity and delegation need strengthening to increase leadership capacity.

Ysgol Y Deri and Greenfield showed strategic, evidence-informed leadership focused on professional learning, while interim visits found that Crownbridge had strengthened curriculum, feedback, and expansion planning, and Greenhill had embedded trauma-informed practice and improved evaluation, attendance, and planning.

Following its core inspection in 2023, Ysgol Pendalar [Gwynedd] was found to need significant improvement. During our visit in March 2025, we noted that the school had made rapid progress. Self-evaluation is now robust, teaching has been strengthened, and governance is now a key strength. The River Centre [Blaenau Gwent], placed in special measures in 2022, is beginning to improve under a new, albeit temporary, leadership team. Clarity in staff roles, stronger behaviour support, and a more engaging curriculum are fostering better relationships, attendance, and outcomes, although curriculum planning and assessment remain at early stages.

Following its core inspection in March 2025, Ysgol Ty Coch [Rhondda Cynon Taf] was found to be in need of significant improvement.

Overview of recommendations from inspections

In total, six providers had an inspection, with one being placed into a follow-up category. A total of 14 recommendations were given.

Five providers (83%) received at least one recommendation linked to the quality of **teaching and learning**, one of which was in a follow-up category:

- Three were asked to ensure that effective practice is shared across the school; the provider in a follow-up category was advised to improve the quality and consistency of teaching and to establish a consistent communication system to support pupils' understanding, expression and engagement

One provider (17%) was given a recommendation related to **well-being, care, support and guidance**. This related to improving the attendance of specific groups of pupils.

Five providers (83%) were given a recommendation linked to **leading and improving**, one of which

was in a follow-up category:

- Three were asked to work with the local authority to address issues related to the learning environment, accommodation, public transport or staff absence
- Three were advised to strengthen self-evaluation processes
- Additional recommendations included strengthening leadership at all levels, sharpening development planning to focus on the impact of whole-school priorities on pupil outcomes and improving the use of school information to inform coherent improvement priorities